

Small and Mighty....Smart and Good

Mary A. Dank

mary.dank@isd742.org

Thirty years ago in a university classroom Dr. Gordon Mortrude would share his wisdom and wit with each new class of future teachers. His lessons were simple, yet profound. He would tell his students there were two absolutes.... parents always sent the best kid they had and you will probably never meet a parent that doesn't want their child to succeed in school. In the course of those sixteen weeks, his passion for parent involvement became clear. Valuing and respecting parents as partners in teaching their children is more than just good idea it is the most critical element in helping a child succeed.

Have you ever tossed a stone into a still pond and watched in wonder as the ripples widened and overlapped, seemingly impossible to see where one ripple ends and the next one begins?

Each circle, each ripple depends directly on the one before, and impacts the one after... each circle makes a difference as the pattern slowly grows and expands across the smooth surface of the water in a unified motion. In my mind it's easy to compare this simple vision, to the shared responsibility that schools, families and communities have in educating our children together. We need to depend on each other.

The circles of our homes, our community, and our schools overlap. For children to learn and thrive, to grow to be the kind of people we hope they will be, they need the support and encouragement of all the circles in which they live. But the circle in the center is the family....that's where it all begins...in your home...it begins and continues to develop with you...each family facing the challenging role of supporting and guiding their children on an educational journey from kindergarten to high school graduation **and** beyond.

Truly none of us lives in isolation. Our lives are intertwined and many of our experiences, shared. We each arrived at this moment, at this conference, with very unique and different life experiences... we come from many different neighborhoods, different cultures, different religious backgrounds, different generations and different family structuresbut we share a common hope – a hope that our children will receive an education that readies them for a future in an ever-changing world. BECAUSE...

Education matters, and what we do to help our kids and families discover that, will make an incredible difference in their ability to reach their highest potential. Education is the key to being able to follow their dreams and accomplish their goals.

Did you ever watch Family Feud... the game show that asks contestants to think of the most popular or right answer to some random question.

What if the big Family Feud question for today was.... 100 educational researchers were surveyed to find out.... What is the best indicator of a child's likely achievement and success in school?

The number one answer ...

You might guess.... The availability of the newest technologywell that makes sensebut that's not what matters most.

Having smaller class sizes...that's a great answer, too.

How about having highly qualified teachers in every classroom..... that is critically important but it's not the top indicator of a child's likely success...

The right answers? After more than thirty years of research..... **family involvement** is the single most important predictor of a child's school success.

It's not enough to just have great teachers and a wonderful principal and to have the best teaching practices going on in every single classroom.... **It's just not enough.** Those things must also be present, but for our schools to be the best...we need to recognize the importance of having strong family partnerships and we need to help families understand the many ways for parents to be involved.

Supt. Dr. Steve Jordhal challenged all staff to 'Put our fingerprint on the district' We need to ask families to do the same. The greater % of families involved in schools, the better the educational programs will be for everyone.

When families get involved ... good things happen....KIDS GET SMARTER! Research has continually proven that student's quality of work improves and student's performance improves, and students tend to have fewer behavioral problems in the classroom when families are involved. That sounds great doesn't it..... But what really counts as "FAMILY involvement" ... what does being INVOLVED really mean?

Well the truth is that some of the most important things parents do might seem small but the impact on their child's life is mighty. For example:

Being involved... actually starts early in the morning every day of the school year at your house.... Making sure kids have a calm and happy start each day and sending them off to school with a positive mindset makes a huge difference in their attitude and their ability to concentrate when they arrive at school, no matter what their age. What families do at home in the morning really matters because it sets the tone for the whole day...

Being involved means spending time together after school, too....showing an interest in what your kids are learning and asking questions about their day and their friends. It means monitoring homework so kids really do get it done, and reading books or sharing the stories from your own family history and culture.

These moments with kids have a major impact on how well they will do in school. Being involved also means building connections to the outside interests your child pursues... whether its' soccer or swimming, drumline or drama. The important thing is that you are tuned in to your child's life both in school and out of school.

Being involved also means using your voice to speak on your child's behalf. No one has a more genuine interest in your child than you have. No one sees your child in the same way you do. Parents have a level of information that teachers simple do not have and because of that your input is crucial to the decisions that are made regarding your child.

Being involved includes attending conferences, or calling a teacher to share some information about your child. And There are times when your child really needs to have you call the teacher!

I wasn't exactly a "helicopter mom" when my kids were young ...that's the parent who is always hovering too close, ready to swoop in for the rescue whenever the going gets tough. But sometimes...maybe I was. Sometimes, you just know in your heart that it's time to swoop in. You just have the feeling that the teacher would benefit from knowing something special about your child. It's just that sense that "if only he knew..."

Events in a family's life impact a child's performance in school – the death of a loved, a pending move, separation, divorce, or medical issues are examples of situations that teachers may not be aware of without input from the family. When parents share pertinent information, the classroom teacher and school are more able to support their children.

Children do face big issues that parents need to share with teachers. For example... shortly after moving to Michigan, I met Stella as we both dropped our older children off for a final gymnastics class at the end of the summer. She was holding a very tiny baby boy, as was I. Walking back to our cars we began a conversation that would prove to be the start of an enduring friendship.

Of course, I asked how old her son was, and her response was both shocking and heartbreaking. Forrest she told me was three months old, but he had a terminal heart defect and the chance that he would survive beyond his second birthday without a transplant was less than 5%. As we talked, one of her major concerns emerged... how would her daughters, Adrienne a fourth grader and Eleanor a first grader, ever get through the rough days ahead. What she would discover when she confided in their teachers was that Adrienne and Eleanor were not going to have to face this alone. The teachers and school counselor were amazing, providing the girls with the emotional support they needed. Because they knew.... when Eleanor said she was just too sad to play a game... her teacher understood. When Adrienne needed a ride home after Kid's Choir, her teacher was there to make that happen. And when Forrest died at the age of seventeen months, the teachers and other staff from the school were there to continue to help the girls and their family face the day to day struggle of moving on.

Just what is a family's ultimate role in education...there must be lots of possible answers. One good answer is that families have the task of supporting the learning that's happening outside of the classroom. I think many families know the importance of monitoring their kid's homework, reading with kids at home every night, and quizzing them the night before a spelling test or history quiz. Many families are doing things at home that help their kids do well in school and help their kids get smarter. And that might be the right answer... but there is a lot more to it than that. **Because it's not enough for us to just help our kids grow up to be smart...** our kids also need to grow up to be good... to be good people, good members of the communities in which they live and to be good citizens of our nation and of the world. The ultimate role family's play might actually be to help their children grow up to be SMART AND GOOD. And the question that follows would be... just how do we do that?

It begins with believing that your child can achieve. People in general and kids in particular, live up to.... or (unfortunately) down to, the expectations we, the adults in the life, set for them. If the adults who love and care for a child set realistic expectations, chances are the child will work to meet that level of competence both academically and in their behavior and attitudes.

One of the most important things we can do to help our children grow up to be both SMART and GOOD is to believe that they can. We need to have HIGH EXPECTATIONS for High Expectations lead to HIGH PERFORMANCE. We need to believe in our children's ability to learn ...so they too will believe it. Our positive attitude is a cornerstone upon which children will build their self confidence and learn to believe in themselves. At home and at school, kids need to know we believe in them and in their ability to accomplish their goals.

Every day, we send our children powerful messages about our expectations, our values, and our dreams. Some of the messages kids get from us are that education is important, that being respectful, working hard, doing your best and following rules in school are expected behaviors.

And kids get these messages when you are part of their school activities, when you attend their conferences, when you share books and read to them at home, or sit by them as they do their homework each day.... They get the message... what I do in school and how I do it matters to my family
Kids get the message...my family is expecting me to succeed
They learn that in their family, education matters.

We as parents were our child's first teachers. When our kids were little, we explored the world together, helping them to understand and learn...taking a walk in the woods, reading books or telling stories of our own childhood... watching bubbles float, singing a song, or learning to fish. Through each of these simple activities, we introduced our children to learning and discovery... by allowing them to experience the world around them, we encouraged them to be curious and to ask questions and in doing so, they developed interests and skills that just might last a lifetime.

One of the important things that parents can do that will impact a child's education is to help them develop a level of curiosity and discovery that leads to actively seeking more information and finding new answers. Being curious and asking questions... these seemingly simple acts of childhood lay a foundation for a lifetime of learning.

Help your child keep these skills alive. The more curious a student isthe more they want to learn; curiosity drives learning.

Whether kids are in elementary, middle school, or high school... The more questions kids raise, the more answers they will seek... and the smarter they will grow. Our role as parents and as teachers, is to be a part of this quest for knowledge...to show that we are interested, to encourage them, to get them on the right track, and then to step back and watch them learn.

We don't have to know all the answers.... It's really best if we don't! But being there to show interest, to help gather resources and to provide encouragement will help your student discover the joy of learning --- and when these things are in place...kids do better in school.

And for kids to know that you care... for them to believe that you value education, you need to BE THERE for your children -- taking the time to talk with your kids, read with them, play with them, think with them. To be there so your children know they can count on you being there... Laughing, talking, listening, questioning... this all happens simply by BEING THERE.

The good thing about the role of “BEING THERE” is that it’s not scheduled for one specific time...we get lots of chances to BE THERE for our kids. We just have to be careful that we don’t miss out on too many opportunities, that we don’t let the demands of our busy life overshadow the importance of being there for our kids.

I know that as working adults it’s a balancing act to try to be there for every single special moment. I can remember having days when our kids were all in school ... Joel had to be at a quiz bowl meet, Annie had a swim practice, Emily had to finish a molecular model for her science class and Tony just wanted me to finish reading “Where the Red Fern Grows”... We’ve all been there...when life is just too hectic! And sometimes even when we try really hard, the reality of jobs and other commitments make it impossible to be there for school events ...But if you place BEING THERE as a priority for you and you take advantage of as many opportunities as you can, then not being there sometimes isn’t quite so bad.

Being there...being available, being connected...being in touch with every element of your child’s life. When kids feel cared for and connected they make better choices...both at home and at school.

What counts the most is what we say and do when we are with our children. When kids can count on getting attention at home, they have a greater sense of security and self-worth. This will help them do better not only in school, but also in life when they grow up.

At the start of each new day, we are given another opportunity to have an impact on their future. We are given the opportunity to provide the guidance and love that will make their tomorrows better. We are given the chance to impart to our children the things we value and to help them learn the important lessons of life, helping them grow to be both smart and good. And the amazing thing is, that it happens because of the little things we do each day that quietly send the messages about what we value and what we expect.

(Be a role model)

The years when our kids were young and the center of their world was their own backyard, disappeared pretty quickly... and suddenly they are standing at the end of the sidewalk, waving good-bye and heading to kindergarten; or waving good bye and meeting their friends to walk to middle school or high school, and before you know it, they will be waving good-bye, holding onto that one last hug, as they head off to college or to their first big job interview.

At each of these moments, when life changes, what our kids carry with them are not just the lessons from the world of school and academics, the lessons that made them SMART but they also need the lessons their families have taught them about what is important in life... they also need to carry with them lessons of the heart,... the lessons that make them GOOD.

Much of the work of being a strong influence on your child’s is about being a good role model ... Being willing to show through your actions and words, that education is important, that hard work, determination and perseverance are qualities of character that count. Kids watch us... they learn from us even when we are silent. Usually, our actions speak so loudly, they don’t even hear our words.

Much like a single drop of water can change the surface of a pond, a single question pulled from the pages of a magazine, literally changed my life as a teacher and as a mom.

Quite a few years ago when I was still living and teaching kindergarten in Michigan, I found an article in my Parent's Magazine... Should Values be Taught in America's Public Schools? The subtitle to this article was ...How can we teach our kids to be both smart and good? MMMMMMM

I wanted to know... Regardless of family make-up, culture, religious background, or economic status...what are the values and traits that all families want their children to learn so that when they are adults, they are good people. After doing surveys and interviews with families from many different backgrounds...these were the consistent qualities of characters that parent's desire most for their children.

Respect, Honesty, Compassion Tolerance (acceptance of others) Determination and Persistence, Generosity, Courage, Gratitude, and Humility.

Kids don't just suddenly start to act with compassion, or to be generous, or to feel a sense of responsibility in being respectful of others. They have been learning by example all along. From watching the special people in their life who have demonstrated how to really care for others and act upon that concern, they have learned valuable life lessons.

I'd like to share a few stories with you that highlight some kids who learned these lessons... and what it looks like when families have helped kids build up good qualities of character. These are very simple stories of real kids ... who learned lessons of the heart and put them into action.

COMPASSION/ Kindness: Nick

Nick looked like a future line backer, Tommy was just the opposite. Although both were in my class, but Tommy was actually mainstreamed from the special Ed department with accommodations for his work. Nick had a real knack for helping Tommy and acting as his protector and friend. On this particular morning, Tommy was using a red marker to draw a line through each letter of a word on a printed page as a way of practicing recognition of individual letters. The list had three or four words and it was challenging for Tommy. At the same table, Nick was with a small group of kids doing a pretest of no-excuse words. As I watched, Nick was obviously interested in what Tommy was doing. He would quickly write his word and then go right back to watching Tommy. By the time Nick had written the third spelling word, Tommy was just finishing the first word on his list. With just one word left for Nick to write, I noticed that he was now totally focused on Tommy. And Tommy was just about to cross out the last letter. As he did, Nick jumped up, pumped his arm in the air and yelled out jubilantly "He did it! What a moment to witness... Nick's outward joy in another child's success and the kind, compassionate way in which he watched over Tommy was touching.

In moments such as this, we are given a glimpse into the future to see the kind of person a child is growing to be. where we just know he/she is on the right path. Watching for the little things that are just ordinary...in these moments that make us proud, you will often see a reflection on the model that was provided. Apples don't fall far from the tree...

Honesty ... Dwayne

I always have had a soft spot for misbehaved boys. Dwayne was one of them and he had more energy than most. He arrived in mid-October, to join our second grade class... his third move since he had started kindergarten. Dwayne actually made great gains that year...and his dad was really proud of his progress... both his growing reading ability and his improved behavior. But at the end of the year, Dwayne and his dad moved again. Several years later I ran into Dwayne at a little gift shop. In one corner of this store there a marvelous candy counter with every imaginable delight. As I walked in I noticed a few middle school boys hanging out at the candy counter, As I passed the counter, I heard my name and turned around to see

Dwayne, now almost as tall as I was and he was coming toward me... all smiles. We talked a bit and he told me he was doing a great job in school. He was excited about being on the knowledge bowl team and loved wrestling... (*Somehow I should have guessed!*) After a few minutes, he returned to his friends and they each finished paying for their candy and headed out the door. I picked out the card and went up to the counter to pay. I was just about to hand the clerk my check when the door opened again and in walked Dwayne. The clerk had given him too much change-- five dollar bill mixed in with the ones and he brought it back!

In those few moments...a glimpse into the future: Dwayne was growing up to be both smart and good....

A story of **COURAGE and DETERMINATION**: Taylor Strand

Some of you might know Taylor Strand's story of courage. In the early morning hours on April 5, 2008, life was forever changed for a thirteen year old girl from Sauk Rapids. In a horrific accident, third degree burns covered between 70 and 80 % of her body. The fight for her life was intense...and there were moments when survival seemed impossible. The months of painful surgeries and treatments seemed to go on forever. I know of her story because her aunt teaches with me. The amazing courage this beautiful young girl displayed is hard to describe. But even beyond courage... her concern for others is in many ways just as remarkable. Although she has been through so much, she has embarked a special mission to raise funds and help out another child named Carter whose family has had to face their own difficult medical journey with him. Taylor has turned her tragedy into a life's lesson. She has become a role model for many children... and on the first day of school at Talahi this year, Taylor was hard at work in her aunt's classroom. Giving back, being of service to others... showing the kids in this classroom what courage really looks like. Taylor missed lots of school when she was hospitalized form many long months, but through hard work and determination she is caught up and back to school... she is a perfect example of what it looks like when a student is both smart and good...

GENEROSITY - The Tooth Fairy's Generosity!

Last year as part of our evening reading program at Talahi call PAKRAT... kids and their families took part in a Read-a-thon that was sponsored by the PTA. Kids had pledges for reading... a penny a page, a nickel a night, or a dime a day to help raise funds for some of the special projects at our school. We raised more than \$1400. There were so many great examples of student's generosity ... but one little kindergarten girl, Mayela, touched my heart. One morning as I visited classrooms she came up to me and asked if kids could give a dollar instead of penny. I told her they could if they really wanted to Not knowing why she had asked. Minutes later she was back, holding a one dollar bill. She had lost a tooth the day before and the tooth fairy left a dollar under her pillow. That's what she wanted to do with her money....she wanted to give it to her school. Amazing... she is only six.

Service to others...

I'd like to tell you one last story... a story that clearly shows that ordinary kids, like yours and mine can grow up to be both smart and good and in doing that, they can make a big difference in the world.

Just six years ago, four freshmen at the University of MN were sitting around in a dorm room one night sharing about their lives. They were talking about how lucky they were to be where they were, and to have so much when others had so little. And that night... STLF (Students Today, Leader Forever and the Pay It Forward Tour

was born. They pledged to each other that they would do something to make a difference in the lives of others before they graduated.

And that night they hatched a plan... I know... some of you are thinking, mmmm 4 freshman, sitting around in a dorm room, hatching a plan... this ought to be good. Well... it was. That night, they decided to spend their spring break the following March being of service to others. The challenge was to find 40 other friends who would be willing to do the same thing and join them on this grand adventure to make a difference...

Four months later, 44 kids set off on the first STLF spring break tour. They rented a bus, each paying \$400 to cover the costs and went to several sites in surrounding states and worked at homeless shelters, community parks, VA hospitals, and schools. They returned after eight days of hard work with a promise to each other to do it again. And they did... over and over again.

STLF has spread to 20 different university campuses and as of last spring 7,768 young men and women (and a few “bus parents” like me) have given up their spring break to work together to pay it forward. The four original thinkers have continued to work with the STLF project (now a MN non-profit organization) they recently initiated a new idea.... HS and MS service learning trips for students and their parents. These four teenagers, who set out to make a difference, truly have. To date, more than 82,000 hours of community have been completed during spring breaks. The organization they created had a simple mission—to inspire, challenge, and encourage others to live to their fullest potential.

To live life to their fullest potential we must help our children grow to be both smart and good. Helping with school lessons, reading together, going to the library.... There are many ways that your actions will have a direct impact on your child’s academic performance in school.

And helping your children learn lessons of character at home will also make a difference in how well they will learn at school and live their lives. Our kids need to learn as much as they can about dealing with the reality of life so that when they face the tough moments and are challenged to make the right choice... they will have your words and your actions stuck in their head.

The second verse of the poem Children Learn What they live reminds all of us who live and work with children what is important.

If children live with tolerance, they learn patience.

If children live with sharing, they learn generosity.

If children live with honesty, they learn truthfulness...

If children live with kindness and consideration, they learn respect...

If children live with friendliness, they learn the world is a wonderful place in which to live.

The path to success is sometimes littered with rough spots and hard decisions, but when the special adults in a child’s life are actively involved and care about what is happening in their child’s school, the likeliness that the child will succeed is so much greater. We may face immense challenges but there is immense hope... hope for all of us who have and will continue to shape the lives of children and set them on the road to success.

HOPES and DREAMS As adults, we all hold within our hearts, our own hopes and dreams for our children's future. Although we are all different in many ways, you can be almost guaranteed that if you sat and talked with another parent today about what you really want for your child, you would discover that we share many of the same, hopes and dreams.

We hope our children will be happy at school and be excited about learning

We hope they will do well academically and be challenged and supported at whatever their level of performance might be

We hope they will find good friends ... that they will be liked

And we hope that when the moment comes that we finally see our children as adults that they will have attained not only academic success but a high degree of happiness and satisfaction with who they are, and what they do.

President Obama spoke to AMERICA'S students at the start of the school year and he told them... "At the end of the day, we can have the most dedicated teachers, the most supportive parents, and the best schools in the world – and none of it will matter unless you fulfill your responsibilities. Unless you show up to those schools; pay attention to those teachers; listen to your parents, grandparents and other adults; and put in the hard work it takes to succeed. "

We need to challenge our kids to work hard and to put forth the effort to do well in school. We can provide the support... but our children must shoulder the responsibility for doing well in school for themselves.

Butterfly Story.

Education is preparation for life itself. And it's **not enough to just be SMART**. To find their way in the world also requires that our children build the capacity to be respectful, compassionate, and honest individuals. They need to possess the qualities of character that define a good person.

We all need to work together so our children will have the knowledge they need to be academically successful, the determination to work hard, the confidence to reach their goals and the hallmarks of character that are the key to growing up to be *GOOD—a good person, a good friend, a good neighbor and a good citizen of the world. They need to grow up to be smart and good.*